

Great
speeches
of the
20th
century

I have a dream

Martin Luther King
August 28 1963

Foreword by Gary Young

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This speech was delivered by
Martin Luther King on August 28 1963
at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington

Series editor Tom Clark, Art director Gavin Brammall
Production Darren Gavigan, Subeditor Patrick Keneally
Research Kate Abbott, Joanne Murphy, Alexi Mostrous
Illustration by John Spencer

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Like all great oratory its brilliance was in its simplicity. Like all great speeches it understood its audience. And like all great performances it owed as much to delivery as content. But it stands out because it was both timely in its message and timeless in its appeal. Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" is still pertinent, even though many of its immediate demands have been met, and it is still relevant, beyond America's borders and the context that it addressed. Yet, if President John Kennedy had had his way, it would never have been delivered. And if King had been left to his own devices it might have been forgotten.

On June 22 1963, Kennedy met civil rights leaders. A month before, segregationists in Alabama had turned dogs on black teenagers. Even as the president stood on a balcony in divided Berlin demanding freedom in eastern Europe, he could not secure it for black people at home. America's racial politics had become an embarrassment. Plans for the August march were already under way. Kennedy, whose civil rights bill faced a tough ride through Congress, pleaded with the leaders to call it off, arguing "We want success in Congress. Not just a big show at the Capitol." "It may seem ill-timed," said King. "Frankly, I have never engaged in a direct action ... that did not seem ill-timed." The march went ahead. Kennedy decided that he would co-opt what he could not cancel, and declared his support.

The prospect of black protesters terrified Washington's white elite, and it is striking that the contemporary Guardian report of the march, in which King's speech was not mentioned, does refer to many police and marshals being present (see page 13). Although the Pentagon put 19,000 troops on standby, of the quarter of a million people who turned up, only four – all of them white – were arrested. It was a balmy day, and familiar faces in the crowd included Charlton Heston, Sammy Davis Jr and Marlon Brando. King was the final speaker and everything in his speech, from the cadence of his delivery to the lyrical repetition of its most vital refrains ("I have a dream" or "Let freedom ring"), drew on the religious traditions of

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black American politics that merge the pulpit with the podium. It was a basic message made beautiful by his mastery of metaphor. Words to him were like stone to a skilled sculptor, raw material which he deftly chiselled away to shape and define something of aesthetic, as well as practical, value. King had started to wind up the speech, without what has become the signature passage, when the singer Mahalia Jackson, standing nearby, encouraged him to go on. When he began to tell the crowd, "Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama," she urged him, "Tell them about your dream, Martin."

King went on to draw upon a version of a speech he had made many times before. But on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the substance of the words rose to the symbolism of the occasion. In a nation apprehensive about its global status, the speech was a precision strike. Starting with Abraham Lincoln and ending with "a dream rooted in the American dream," it challenged segregation but left intact almost everything else that white America held dear. Not surprisingly, blacks and whites understood the speech differently. A poll soon afterwards showed only 3% of blacks and 74% of whites believed that "negroes [were] moving too fast". Given that the inequality which sparked the march still exists, it is not surprising differences in interpretation continue. Many white Americans saw the civil-rights legislation, passed two years later, as drawing a line under racial inequality. Not only would they resist demands to address the legacy of segregation through affirmative action, they would do so with King's own words, insisting that job candidates be "judged not on the colour of their skin but the content of their character".

But King had stated clearly that "1963 is not an end but a beginning". In an interview just before he died he explained that overcoming economic deprivation was essential to making the dream a reality. His wish that "sons of former slaves and sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" was sincere, but not the whole story. Integration had won African-Americans the right to eat in any restaurant. Only equality could ensure that they could pay the bill. Integration was not an end in itself but the means towards that still-elusive goal. In King's words, black Americans "came to the nation's capital to cash a cheque ... that will give [them] the riches of freedom". They are still waiting for America to honour it.

Gary Younge is a Guardian columnist. An earlier version of this article appeared in the Guardian on the 40th anniversary of the speech

I have a dream

Martin Luther King,
August 28 1963

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon-light of hope to millions of negro slaves, who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But 100 years later, the negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the negro is still sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chains of discrimination.

One hundred years later, the negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we've come here today to dramatise a shameful condition.

In a sense, we've come to our nation's capital to cash a cheque. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.

This note was a promise that all men – yes, black men as well as white men – would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of colour are concerned. Instead of honouring this sacred obligation, America has given the negro people a bad cheque, a cheque which has come back marked "insufficient funds".

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this cheque, a cheque that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquillising drug of gradualism.

Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.

Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice.

Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end but a beginning.

Those who hope that the negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds.

Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and

again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvellous new militancy which has engulfed the negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realise that their destiny is tied up with our destiny, and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.

We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.

We cannot be satisfied as long as the negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one.

We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For whites only".

We cannot be satisfied as long as a negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.

No, no we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality.

You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair. I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day, on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right down in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the south with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.

With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day, this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring!"

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.

Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado.

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

But not only that, let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi, from every mountainside.

Let freedom ring.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, "Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

The original report of the march for jobs and freedom is reproduced below. It did not mention King's speech. But by the time of his murder in 1968, King was revered internationally as a speaker – as the second article shows

200,000 demonstrate for civil rights

Good order maintained in Washington

From Richard Scott

August 29 1963

The Washington march for jobs and freedom – the largest demonstration of its kind the capital has ever seen – has been an outstanding success. The target of 100,000 marchers was in fact doubled.

Police estimate that over 200,000, of whom perhaps nine-tenths were Negro and one-tenth white, marched into the area around the massive memorial to Abraham Lincoln, who signed the emancipation proclamation 100 years ago. They were in holiday mood, and entirely orderly; the majority were young.

The thousands of police and marshals have been primarily occupied with assisting the footsore and the thirsty, lost children, and those who fainted. In all 1,335 people required treatment. Four arrests were made, none

involving demonstrators.

The first trickle of people reached the assembly point at about seven o'clock this morning. By ten o'clock there were some 40,000 and by 11:30 the police estimated the crowd had reached the 100,000 mark.

The weather was ideal, the marchers orderly. Washington's infamous humidity was happily lacking. But over-exertion, excitement, and too many hot dogs took their toll. Scores of marchers fainted and were treated in first-aid stations.

Brotherhood of man

The nature of the march was illustrated by a white man in clerical garb and carrying a placard with these words: "We march together, Protestants – Catholics – Jews, for the dignity and brotherhood of all men under God." Other placards said: "No US dough to help Jim Crow grow";

"We demand equal rights now"; "We demand an FE (fair employment) law now"; "We demand an end to police brutality now."

Every sort and condition of humanity was represented – well-dressed young men and women, a few women in slacks, many clergymen, an occasional white beatnik in beard and jeans, a Negro in a wheelchair holding a placard reading "Help my people." The folk-singer Odetta led a huge audience in an emotional version of "Where I Stand." Earlier this morning the leaders of the 10 organisations which sponsored the march went to Capitol Hill to meet Democratic and Republican leaders of Congress and, after the march was over, President Kennedy.

In turn, the leaders of the main organisations which have sponsored the march delivered brief addresses. Their theme, like that on the placards carried by the marchers, was that equal rights in full must be granted NOW to all American citizens regardless of their race or religion. They were, with one exception, un inflammatory, sober statements.

President Kennedy said that he was impressed with the deep fervour and the quiet dignity of

the demonstrators.

King this side of Jordan
By Jonathan Steele
April 6 1968

"He was the first Negro minister whom I have ever heard who can reduce the Negro problem to a spiritual matter and yet inspire the people to seek a solution on this side of the Jordan, not in life after death." So wrote the Negro author, Louis Lomax, catching the crucial spark that made Martin Luther King, Jr. stand out from his fellow ministers in the South, and step into the ranks of the world's martyrs.

To anyone who was ever there when King spoke, the experience was unforgettable. A small man, barely five foot seven, he dominated the pulpit or the podium. In a slow but sonorous voice, the biblical cadences rolled out, and the crowd would sway with them, and punctuate them with the answering calls that are such a feature of Negro churches. And the church doors would open and the crowd would surge out into the hot and dusty Southern street, and down to the court house or the city hall with its petitions, its banners and its faith that change was on the way.